

Francis Thompson

The last great English Poet.



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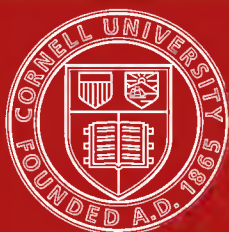
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Francis Thompson, the Preston-born poet,



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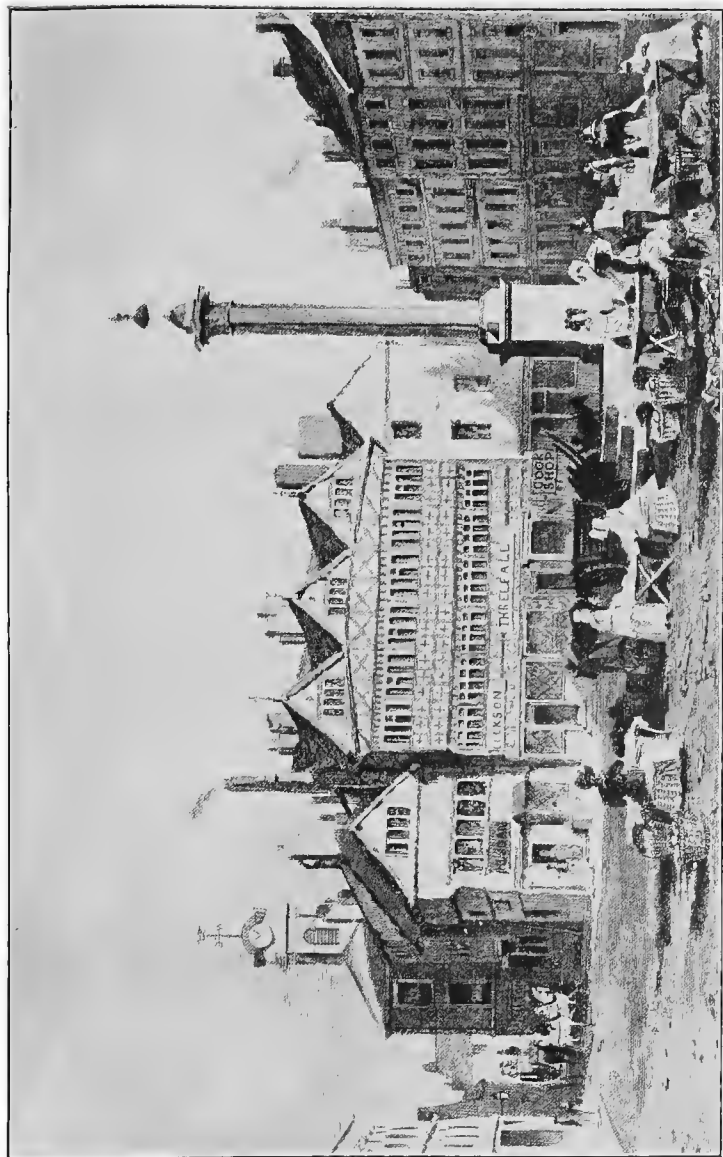


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P I S T O N I N 1850. THE YEAR OF FRANCIS THOMPSON'S BIRTH.

Francis Thompson,

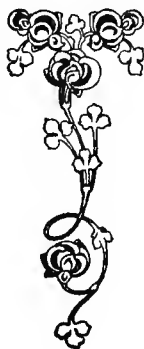
THE

Preston-born Poet

〈with Notes on some of his works〉,

— BY —

JOHN THOMSON.



PRESTON :
ALFRED HALEWOOD,
"THE TEMPLE OF THE MUSES,"
1912.



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PREFACE.



The idea of this brief outline of the life and works of Francis Thompson was suggested by the erection of the commemorative tablet on his birthplace, and by enquiries then made concerning his life and career. I am indebted to Mr. Meynell for permission to quote from Thompson's poems, to Sir Alfred Hopkinson for information as to the poet's stay at Owens College, and to the Rev. H. K. Mann (Newcastle-on-Tyne), for leave to reproduce the two photographs of Thompson which appeared in the *Ushaw Magazine* of March, 1908. I am also indebted to the Magazine articles referred to (particularly the *Ushaw Magazine*), and to the prefatory note by Mr. Meynell and the "appreciations" in the volume of *Selected Poems* issued by Messrs. Burns & Oates, Orchard Street, London, the Poet's publishers.

JOHN THOMSON.

44, *Great Avenham Street,*

Preston, September, 1912.

TO
FRANCIS THOMPSON.



THOMPSON, thy music like a deep stream flows
From mystic heights, and mirrors as it goes
The shades and splendours of that luring peak,
Where poet-dreamers dwell, and tireless seek
Their adequate strains ; and thy song is fed
By cyclic hauntings from the cliffs of dread
Thou perforce clomb, a wider world to scan,
And catch lost echoes of the Pipes of Pan.

From other sounds aloof thy music rolls,
And men *must* hearken for it draws their souls :
Now thrills with awe, and now with such sweet stress
As linketh heart to heart in tenderness
By dire compelling, none save those may wield,
Whose birth-fused breath is fashioned for the yield—
Who reach the crownèd gates, and entrance gain
To highest Heaven, through the Arch of Pain !

J. T.

FRANCIS THOMPSON, POET AND MYSTIC.

Go, songs, for ended is our brief, sweet play;
Go, children of swift joy and tardy sorrow:
And some are sung, and that was yesterday,
And some unsung, and that may be to-morrow.

Go forth; and if it be o'er stony way,
Old joy can lend what newer grief must borrow:
And it was sweet, and that was yesterday,
And sweet is sweet, though purchased with sorrow.
(F. Thompson).

FRANCIS THOMPSON, poet and mystic, "master of the lordly line, the daring image, and the lyric's lilt," was born at Preston, on the 18th December, 1859, in the house numbered 7, Winckley Street, now used as a solicitor's office. He was baptised at St. Ignatius' Church, in that town, on the 20th of the same month. His full name, as it appears on the register of births, is Francis *Joseph* Thompson; but his first published poem having been signed "Francis Thompson," it was thought advisable that he should, as he ever afterwards did, adhere to the shorter form. The commemorative tablet placed,

on the 10th August, 1910, over the doorway of the house where the poet first saw the light, gives his name in full. The tablet is the gift of Mrs. Catherine Holiday, of Hawkshead, (formerly of Preston,) and it is a sadly-curious fact that, only after many enquiries, could the exact place of birth of one destined "down the annals of fame to carry a name immortal"—the greatest of his proud town's sons—be found.

The poet's father was Charles Thompson, a physician of some note locally—a man (according to a writer in the *Church Times*, April 21, 1911) firm and kind, but somewhat austere in discipline, and with no poetic instinct; his mother, Mary Turner Thompson, formerly Morton. Both parents were Catholics: the mother a convert some years before her marriage. Francis was the second of the five children, all of whom were born in Preston. Two babies, Charles Joseph, the firstborn (who only lived a day), and Helen Mary, the fourth, are buried there.

Dr. Thompson appears to have lived in several houses in Preston—the one in Winckley Street, already mentioned; before that (probably from 1856 to 1858) at 12, St. Ignatius' Square; and after the birth of Francis, first in Winckley Square; and later in Latham Street. Two of the doctor's children were born at the house in Winckley Square (No. 33)—one in 1861, the other in 1862. It was whilst residing in Latham Street, in 1864, that his daughter Helen Mary died, and his last child was born. The doctor's removal to Ashton-under-Lyne towards the

end of 1864, while his three surviving children were so young, will account for that town being sometimes given as the poet's birthplace.

Young Thompson was sent on the 22nd September, 1870, to Ushaw College, near Durham, well known at that time for its literary associations with Lingard and Wiseman, and later, with Lafcadio Hearn. Our youthful student soon evinced a remarkable love of books, and being specially indulged by his masters in his taste for the reading of the classics, he early distinguished himself in such subjects as their ample reading would naturally improve. Most of his leisure hours were spent in the well-stocked libraries, sometimes, in his seminary days, behind a barrier of books erected as a protection from the "attentions" (catapults, bullets of paper, and the like) of his class-mates. He was not strong enough to take much part in the college games, and only in the racquet courts, at handball, did he attain a proficiency above the average. His companions relate that he was extremely fond of watching, and was accounted a good judge of, Cricket. Indeed, the "sunlit pitch" seems to have had a fascination for him which he never lost. Towards the end of his life he knew all the famous scores of the preceding quarter of a century: after his death, the averages of his cricket heroes, for over 30 years, most carefully compiled, were found among his papers, and with them some verses on the absorbing game, in which the names of Hornby and Barlow appear. The verses, trivial and probably never intended for print, end:

It is little I repair to the matches of the Southron folk,
 Though my own red roses there may blow ;
It is little I repair to the matches of the Southron folk,
 Though the red roses crest the caps I know.
For the field is full of shades as I near the shadowy coast,
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost :
And I look through my tears on a soundless, clapping host,
 As the run-stealers flicker to and fro.
 To and fro,
O my Hornby and my Barlow, long ago.

The lines are not dated, but seem to have been called forth by an incident which occurred not long before the poet's death. It would appear that he had been invited to Lord's to see Middlesex and Lancashire, and had agreed to go ; but as the time for the match drew near, the sad memories of bygone days became too much for him. The pathetic interest of a composition so reminiscent of the "long ago" will be understood by those who know what it is to miss their favourite faces from the field of sport. It may be mentioned, in passing, that Thompson wrote a lengthy criticism of "The Jubilee Book of Cricket" in the *Academy* (September 4, 1897)—a criticism full of Cricket acumen.

Whilst at Ushaw, Thompson wrote a number of verses, some of which are still in the possession of the college authorities, or of college companions. In more than one, the quaint spelling and love of the older words which

marked his later works, are noticeable. It must be for others to say how far these early efforts exhibit the buddings of that exuberant genius, which was afterwards to display itself so wonderfully. Five such poems, "Lamente forre Stephanon," "Song of the Neglected Poet," "Finchale," "Dirge of Douglas," "A Song of Homildon," are given in full in the *Ushaw Magazine* for March, 1908. "The Song of the Neglected Poet," by its very title, cannot fail to excite interest among Thompson lovers. Its theme is the praise of poesy: the first three verses run:—

Still, be still within my breast, thou ever, ever wailing
heart;
Hush, O hush within my bosom, beating, beating heart
of mine!
Lay aside thy useless grief, and brood not o'er thy aching
smart.
Wherefore but for sick hearts' healing, came down poesy
divine?

Mourn not, soul, o'er hopes departed, efforts spent, and
spent in vain;
On a glorious strife we entered, and 'twas for a priceless
stake;
Well 'twas foughten, well we've struggled, and, tho' all
our hopes are slain,
Yet, my soul, we have a treasure not the banded world
can take.

Poesy, that glorious treasure! Poesy my own for e'er!
Mine and thine, my soul, for ever, ours though all else
may be gone;
Like the sun it shone upon us when our life began so fair,
Like the moon it stays to cheer us now our night is
almost done.

The "Dirge of Douglas" has a martial ring :

Let no ruthful burying song
Lament the Earl of Douglas,
But let his praises loud and long
Echo the rocks and hills among,
Poured from the lips of warriors strong,
The doughty Earl of Douglas !

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Bear him to his grave with a warlike pace,
Sing no sad requiem o'er him ;
The mightiest he of all his race,
He is gone, and none can fill his place !
Let the champion lie in his warrior's grace
Where his forefathers lay before him.

Neither in arithmetic, nor later in mathematics, was the young poet a success. Indeed, at the end of his college career, he had fallen to the last place in mathematical subjects. But in English and essay-writing he was often the first, both at seminary and college. On five only out of the twenty-one occasions in his seminary days when examinations in essay writing were held, did he fail to secure the top place. From these early compositions, many of which are still in existence, it would appear that battles and sieges were the favourite subjects in prose of the shy and gentle youth whose own battle of life was destined to be singularly severe and prolonged. One of his essays, "The Storming of the Bridge of Lodi," written for a speaker at the debating club in 1874 (the year Thompson passed from seminary into college proper), evoked considerable enthusiasm among his companions.

The seven years spent by Thompson at Ushaw stamped his after-life deeply with its religious atmosphere. He was orthodox through and through, "from within, from beneath, outward to his acts, upward to his poetry." If, as has been said by one, his poetry is spiritual even to a fault, it must be a "fault" the glory, doubtless, of his Alma Mater!

It was after our poet left Ushaw (whose peaceful groves he never revisited), that the clouds of his life began to gather. He returned to his home (Stamford Street, Ashton-under-Lyne) in July, 1877, and was sent in October of the same year, to Owens College, Manchester, to study medicine. Thus much is known that the subject was entirely distasteful to him, and that, though he distinguished himself in Greek in his preliminary examination, he did not devote himself to the reading necessary for the profession which it was intended he should follow: like the youthful Keats he was more engrossed by volumes of poetry than by treatises on anatomy. The "Halls of Medicine" saw him but seldom: it was in the public libraries of Manchester, with his favourite authors, the poets, that he spent most of his days. His passion for Cricket led him often, at this time, to Old Trafford, among the great matches which he witnessed there being the historic meeting of Lancashire and Gloucestershire on July 25, 26, and 27, 1878.

Thompson spent nearly eight years at Owens College. Among those contemporary with him are many names of eminence: Professor W. Thorburn, Dr. E. S. Reynolds,

Dr. Robert Maguire, Dr. Leopold Larmuth, and the late Dr. Thomas Harris, among the rest. But Thompson as a medical student was a misfit, for his hopes of healing lay elsewhere than in the consulting room, as his "Song of the Neglected Poet," already quoted, shows.

The graceful and striking memorial recently (July, 1912) affixed in Manchester University to Thompson's memory as a student at Owens College bears some sad lines (taken from his "Ode to the Setting Sun") which may serve to indicate the sense of disappointment haunting his life at the period of closing his medical studies :

Whatso looks lovelily
Is but the rainbow on life's weeping rain.
Why have we longings of immortal pain,
And all we long for mortal? Woe is me,
And all our chants but chaplet some decay
As mine this vanishing —nay vanished day.

He does not seem ever to have concealed his mode of living at Manchester, or his repugnance to the profession selected for him, and in the end, the student whose heart was set on the construction of sentences rather than the structure of the human body, had to listen to the reproaches of an angry parent. There was a terrible scene between father and son. Still unwilling to pursue his medical studies, and fearful of another such meeting, the young man abruptly fled from home. In the ordinary course he would have spent the summer vacation of that year (1885) with his father; but it was shortly before the vacation—in the July of 1885—that the break which was to bring such sad consequences in its train, came. Francis seems to have

left with little in his pocket, and walked by many a devious way, until he arrived, in search of a living, in London. In the words of Mr. Meynell: "Like De Quincey he went to London, and knew Oxford Street for a stony-hearted stepmother." Arrived in the great city, without means and without any prospects before him, his life's tragedy began. Like Shakespeare in his early London days it was only by accepting "mean employment" that Thompson kept his soul in his body.

He worked for a while as an assistant in a boot shop near Leicester Square; later as a "collector" for a book-seller, for whom he had to haul heavy sacks through the streets. But days there were when no employment of any kind could be had, and the homeless night followed perforce the hungry day. Those who see in Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven," a narration of his own experiences, will find many a passage which must have been suggested by this period:

In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
 I shook the pillaring hours
 And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
 I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years—
 My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
 My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
 Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.

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Ah! must—
 Designer infinite—
 Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn
 with it?

Lines such as these tell their own story of the years "with heavy griefs so overplussed."

Thompson was never physically strong. He had been afflicted with a nervous breakdown before leaving Manchester, from the effects of which he never recovered. His life in London, before his "discovery" in 1888, cut off from home, and without a friend, must have been terrible. At times utterly destitute, at others glad to earn a trifling sum by any odd job (selling matches and the like) that chance threw in his way, his home perchance a railway arch or bench in the Park—oppressed, too, by the thoughts of filial duty unfulfilled, it is no wonder that he should have sought the attractions of laudanum (whose wiles he learned whilst a student of medicine) to bring some measure of relief. It is related that on one occasion in his darkest days he was so strongly tempted to self-destruction that he only escaped the tempter by some mysterious, unseen intervention, and that the heaven of which he speaks:

Short arm needs man to reach to heaven,
So ready is heaven to stoop to him;

did indeed stoop down to save him, by dashing away the poison he had intended, in a fit of despair, to take.

There is a touching incident (again recalling De Quincey) recorded in his own matchless way in his volume of "Sister Songs" (A Child's Kiss) which must have occurred in this "nightmare" time:—



BIRTHPLACE OF FRANCIS THOMPSON,
7, WINCKLEY STREET, PRESTON.

Once, bright Sylviola ! in days not far,
 Once—in that nightmare-time which still doth haunt
 My dreams, a grin, unbidden visitant—
 Forlorn, and faint, and stark,
 I had endured through watches of the dark
 The abashless inquisition of each star,
 Yea, was the outcast mark
 Of all those heavenly passers' scrutiny ;
 Stood bound and helplessly
 For Time to shoot his barbed minutes at me ;
 Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
 In night's slow-wheelèd car :
 Until the tardy dawn dragged me at length
 From under those dread wheels ; and, bled of strength,
 I waited the inevitable last.
 Then there came past
 A child ; like thee, a Spring flower ; but a flower
 Fallen from the budded coronal of Spring,
 And through the city streets blown withering.
 She passed,—O brave, sad, loveliest, tender thing !
 And of her own scant pittance did she give,
 That I might eat and live :
 Then fled, a swift and trackless fugitive.

To what extent our poet's wedding with poverty fashioned an offspring in his poems will be for his biographer to note. The magazine to which Thompson sent his first accepted piece was *Merry England*. For a couple of years he had been sending verses, written on scraps of paper picked up in the streets, to impatient editors—but without result. To the journal mentioned he sent, some time late in 1888, in hopelessly unpresentable manuscript, a poem which has been described as one of the brightest lights of his genius. The brilliancy of the verse-set gems was recognised by the editor, Mr. Wilfrid Meynell, and the poem and its acceptance became the turning point in the poet's career, at a time when all hope seemed gone. The tender-hearted editor, not content with publishing the

verses, determined to find and assist their author. The address—"Post Office, Charing Cross"—given on the manuscript, afforded but little clue, however, and the search for the vagrant poet, then in the most pitiable state after his three years and more of London vagrancy and months of appalling suffering, was a long one. The chemist in Drury Lane from whom Thompson procured the drug which he used to ease his "human smart" was consulted—and in the end the poet was traced to his lodging, to be rescued when everything seemed utterly lost. Won over by the kindness and sympathy of both Mr. and Mrs. Meynell, he agreed to place himself under their care. He was received temporarily into their home, and made the friend of their children. After being medically treated and carefully nursed, he lived for nearly two years in the monastery at Storrington, in Sussex—the Storrington of his "Daisy-flower."

It is to Mr. Meynell, his "more than friend," that the literary world will have to look, in the forthcoming biography of the poet by that brilliant writer, for many particulars of the poet's inner life: and it is not strange that the children of the Meynell family became the subject of some of Thompson's finest verses. To their mother, Mrs. Meynell (the gifted poetess eulogised by Ruskin), he dedicated the group of poems, "Love in Dian's Lap," besides many other charming pieces. To Mr. Meynell himself, under the initials "W. M.," he addressed the touching lines:

O tree of many branches! One thou hast
Thou barest not, but grafted'st on thee. Now,
Should all men's thunders break on thee, and leave
Thee reft of bough and blossom, that one branch
Shall cling to thee, my Father, Brother, Friend,
Shall cling to thee, until the end of end!

Of Storrington, Mr. Meynell in his biographical note prefaced to the volume of *Selected Poems*, states: "That beautiful Sussex village has now its fixed place on the map of English literature. For there it was that Francis Thompson discovered his possibilities as a poet." From thenceforth (November, 1888) until about 1897, when he took mainly to the writing of prose, Thompson soared higher and higher in his poetic flights, while his fame steadily grew. If his works are not yet as widely known as those of lesser writers, it is partly because Thompson is the poets' poet, and partly because, as an article in the *Ushaw Magazine* puts it, verses such as his, by their deep symbolism and old-time words, "are by their very character slow-footed travellers. They will journey far, but they must have time."

The first volume of Thompson's Poems, which appeared in 1893, under the simple title, "Poems," attracted attention immediately. Of one of the longer pieces, "The Hound of Heaven," the critics did not hesitate to say that it seemed to be, on the whole, the most wonderful lyric in the language, the author a Crashaw cast in a diviner mould—a worthy disciple of Dante—a companion of Cowley—the equal of Shelley. A great critic summed it up as "the return of the nineteenth century to Thomas a

Kempis." It delighted men of such diverse minds as Sir Edward Burne-Jones and Mr. Coventry Patmore; the Bishop of London (who pronounced it "one of the most tremendous poems ever written"); and the Rev. R. J. Campbell, the Nonconformist divine. Grave and learned priests quoted it in their sermons; scholars and literary men in every walk of life learnt it by heart; the *Times* emphatically declared that men will still be learning it 200 years hence! Considered by most authorities to be Thompson's masterpiece, "The Hound of Heaven" abounds in gems of artistic trope and poetic imagery. It is doubtful if any more impressively beautiful gallery of pictures, contained in the space of less than two hundred lines, has been seen in modern days. Its exquisite paintings of the things of Nature—wind, sky, and cloud—which are incidentally presented as the theme proceeds, strike the imagination of all to whom the revelation of natural beauty appeals; the genuine humanity and the powerful symbolism running through the whole of the poem, sink deep into the mind and soul. The subject matter—God's pursuit and conquest of the resisting soul that would find its satisfaction elsewhere than in Him (God being symbolised as the Hound)—is described, to borrow the words of Patmore, "in a torrent of as humanly-expressive verse as was ever inspired by a natural affection."

Of the poems in the first volume it will suffice to quote J. L. Garvin in *The Bookman* :—

"A volume of poetry has not appeared in Queen Victoria's reign more authentic in greatness of utterance

than this. . . . It is perfectly safe to affirm that if Mr. Thompson wrote no other line, by this volume alone he is as secure of remembrance as any poet of the century. . . . Mr. Thompson's first volume is no mere promise—it is itself among the great achievements of English poetry; it has reached the peak of Parnassus at a bound."

The volume entitled "Sister Songs," dedicated to Monica and Madeline Meynell (whose names are thus immortalised), appeared in 1895. Included in it is a poem, "Poet and Anchorite," which contains some lines memorable by their insight into the poet's inner self:—

Love and love's beauty only hold their revels
 In life's familiar, penetrable levels:
 What of its ocean-floor?
 I dwell there evermore.
 From almost earliest youth
 I raised the lids o' the truth,
 And forced her bend on me her shrinking sight—

It was from stern truth, then, that the Prodigal of Song learnt his Art!

"Sister Songs" is described by Mr. Archer as "a book which Shelley would have adored." *The Times* says it contains passages which Spenser would not have disowned. To quote the latter more fully: "Thompson used his large vocabulary with a boldness—and especially a recklessness, almost a frivolity in rhyme—that were worthy of Browning. On the other hand, these rugged points, were, at a further view, absorbed into the total effect of beauty in a manner which Browning never achieved.

. . . . These 'Sister Songs,' written in praise of two little sisters, contain a number of lovely and most musical lines, and some passages—such as the seventh section of the first poem—which Spenser would not have disowned."

The last volume of verse (1897) entitled "New Poems" bears the same high mark of genius, winning the highest praise from the critics and reviewers. Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch ("Q") sums up his estimate of "The Mistress of Vision": "It is verily a wonderful poem; hung, like a fairy tale, in middle air—a sleeping palace of beauty set in a glade in the heart of the woods of Westermain, surprised there and recognized with a gasp as satisfying, and summarizing a thousand youthful longings after beauty."

Maud Diver in her novel "Candles in the Wind" has many fine things to say of Thompson's third volume. One passage only (given purposely without reference to the particular character to which it refers) must suffice to show something of the novelist's appreciation:

During the process [of reading "New Poems"] murmurs of admiration broke from him. He was poet enough to recognise in this new singer a star of the first magnitude; and there, while the pageant in the west flamed and died, he read that regal "Ode to the Setting Sun," which is, in itself, a pageant of colour and sound; a deathless vindication of Death's fruition. Then, eager for more, he passed on to the Anthem of Earth, surrendering his soul to the onrush of its majestic cadences; reading and re-reading, with an exalted thrill, certain lines, doubly pencilled, that echoed in his brain for days.

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At the end of an hour he sat there still—in a changed world; a world no less stern and silent, yet mysteriously softened and spiritualized as if by the brush of a consummate artist.

"Matchless for their beauty," and similar expressions frequently occur in the general descriptions of the volume of "New Poems."

In August, 1908, appeared "The Selected Poems of Francis Thompson," with the biographical note by Mr. Meynell before referred to, and a portrait of the poet in his nineteenth year. The selection, about fifty pieces in all, gives us of Thompson's best, and should serve to bring the larger works, from which they have been so admirably chosen, before a wide circle of readers. The poems on children rightly take the first place; of the one entitled, "Ex Ore Infantium," it is but sober truth to say that nothing so tenderly devotional, and yet so daringly unconventional, has ever before been put into language of such simple power. The volume contains several of the greater poems in full, including "The Hound of Heaven," the "Ode to the Setting Sun," the "Orient Ode," and "Any Saint" (a partly direct, partly mystical poem, of special significance); extracts from the "Mistress of Vision," the "Victorian Ode" (written for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee), "The Anthem of Earth," "Assumpta Maria," and others of the longer works; the whole of "July Fugitive," "Dream Tryst," "Contemplation," and other poems, besides a number of simpler pieces—the Violets of Thompson's Garden of Poesy. The selection includes also the lines "In no Strange Land," found among the poet's papers after his death, and which are remarkable for their striking epitome of his teaching and final message.

It should be mentioned that the poet had promised an Ode for the centenary of Ushaw College, in 1908, but did not live to write it.

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Francis Thompson is not a poet with whom the multitudes of the reading public are as yet familiar, and even in his native town there are many to whom his name is still unknown. He ranks, nevertheless, as one of the few really great poetic geniuses and writers of his century, though his position cannot be definitely assigned until the world has had time to take more careful stock of his treasures, and had leisure to consider the full store of his literary output. For Thompson was not only a poet, but in his later years a writer of prose as sonorous and well nigh as remarkable as his poems. Genius, like nature, would appear to abhor a vacuum ; in our poet's case the years following 1897 may be described as his post-poetic period, a period which produced his great prose works, and the many valuable reviews on Theology, History, Biography, and Travel, which he contributed to the leading periodicals, and which have yet to be reprinted from their files. The prose works which have been published separately up to the present are his "Health and Holiness," or "A Study of the Relations between Brother Ass, the Body, and his Rider, the Soul " (described as an admirable scholastic essay, in heroic prose,) and his works on Shelley, on St. Ignatius of Loyola, and St. John Baptist de la Salle. The essay on Shelley was pronounced by Mr. George

Wyndham to be "the most important contribution to pure letters written in English during the last twenty years." For "The Life of St. Ignatius of Loyola" which must ever remain a memorial to his powers as a prose-writer, original research was, of course, impossible, but, as stated in the editor's note, the author brought to his work the sympathy of genius with genius, and had almost a contemporary's affinity with the age in which the Saint lived. The Rev. Dr. Barry, himself a distinguished writer, says of it: "It is a portrait from life, not a copy. . . . While we read these lines the founder of the great Company stands before us in his habit as he lived." And again: "I hold that our dead poet has written a Life exact in statement, beautiful in point of style. . . . It is a notable addition, if we ought not rather to call it the beginning of a true English literature, in its own department." In an interesting passage in the Life, the Saint is compared with John Wesley, whose lives, though so unlike outwardly, had much of similarity below the surface.

"The Life of St. John Baptist de la Salle," a shorter work, presents the life of the Founder of the Christian Brothers with singular felicity, and contains in the closing chapter a brilliant epigrammatic defence of the Church's championship of free education, in which Thompson, as a prose writer, is seen at his best.

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A seventeenth century poet, born in the nineteenth, bringing with him the solace of old time melody—melody

like unto the richest strains of Crashaw and Cowley—Francis Thompson depends mainly on his poetical works for his place among the literary giants of his age. His poems are among the glories of our literature. They have fashioned for themselves thrones in the hearts of many to whom the charms of verse had never appealed before: their deep faith in the intimate presence of God has been an inspiration and spiritual tonic to innumerable souls.

Writing of her husband, in the year 1893, Lady Burne-Jones states that the winter of that year was cheered by the appearance of a small volume of poems by Francis Thompson, whose name was till then unknown to them. The book moved Sir Edward to admiration and hope, and she tells that, speaking of "The Hound of Heaven," he said: "Since Gabriel's 'Blessed Damozel' no mystical words have so touched me as 'The Hound of Heaven.' Shall I ever forget how I undressed and dressed again, and had to undress again—a thing I most hate—because I could think of nothing else?"

And thousands more have drawn encouragement and hope, not only from "The Hound of Heaven," but from many another of Francis Thompson's poems. Never, surely, was woman worshipped with such utter chastity. "Where," asks Mr. Traill in *The Nineteenth Century*, "unless perhaps here and there in a sonnet of Rossetti's, has this sort of sublimated enthusiasm for the bodily and spiritual beauty of womanhood found such expression between the age of the Stuarts and our own?"

Thompson is above all the poet of celestial vision. His poetry answers to the full Shelley's description of the function of poetry in general; it "redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man." In no other great poet of the nineteenth century are these visitations more frequent or more splendid. The intensity of his mysticism, the glow and fervour of his verse, his rapturous communings, seem to have "fired" the very critics. The extracts appended, taken at random from a number of their appreciations, will serve to exhibit the unprecedented enthusiasm which the poet's lines exercised:—

One has seldom seen poet more wildly abandoned to his rapture, more absorbed in the trance of his ecstasy. When the irresistible moment comes, he throws himself upon his mood as a glad swimmer gives himself to the waves, careless whither the strong tide carries him, knowing only the wild joy of the laughing waters and the rainbow spray. He shouts, as it were, for mere gladness, in the welter of wonderful words, and he dives swift and fearless to fetch his deep-sea fancies.—R. LE GALLIENNE, in *The Daily Chronicle*.

Here are dominion—dominion over language, and a sincerity as of Robert Burns. . . . In our opinion, Mr. Thompson's poetry at its highest attains a sublimity unsurpassed by any Victorian poet.—*The Speaker*.

To read Mr. Francis Thompson's poems is like setting sail with Drake or Hawkins in search of new worlds and golden spoils. He has the magnificent Elizabethan manner, the splendour of conception, the largeness of imagery.—KATHARINE TYNAN-HINKSON, in *The Bookman*.

He swung a rare incense in a censer of gold, under the vault of a chapel where he had hung votive offerings. When he chanted in his chapel of dreams, the airs were often airs which he had learnt from Crashaw and from Patmore. They came to life again when he used them, and he made for himself a music which was part strangely familiar and part his own, almost bewilderingly. Such reed-notes and such orchestration of sound

were heard nowhere else; and people listened to the music, entranced as by a new magic. The genius of Francis Thompson was Oriental, exuberant in colour, woven into elaborate patterns, and went draped in old silk robes, that had survived many dynasties. The spectacle of him was an enchantment; he passed like a wild vagabond of the mind, dazzling our sight.—ARTHUR SYMONS, in *The Saturday Review*.

In Francis Thompson's poetry, as in the poetry of the universe, you can work infinitely out and out, but yet infinitely in and in. These two infinities are the mark of greatness; and he was a great poet.—C. K. CHESTERTON, in *The Illustrated London News*.

We find that in these poems profound thought, far-fetched splendour of imagery, and nimble-witted discernment of those analogies which are the roots of the poet's language, abound . . . qualities which ought to place him in the permanent ranks of fame, with Cowley and with Crashaw.—COVENTRY PATMORE, in *The Fortnightly Review*.

The regal airs, the prophetic ardours, the apocalyptic vision, the supreme utterance—he has them all.—*The Bookman*.

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The later years of Thompson's life seem to have been uneventful save for his writings, and for an incident in 1888, and another in 1897, either of which might have ended disastrously. Whilst at Storrington it was his custom to spend long hours in walks out of doors. On one of these walks, shortly after his arrival at the Monastery in November, 1888, he got lost in a fog on the Downs, and was in a state of exhaustion when found. On the second occasion (sometime in 1897), whilst in apartments in London, he had been smoking in bed, and having fallen asleep, awoke to find himself surrounded with flames. He jumped up, fortunately in time to enable him to escape without injury, save such as an irate landlady poured, justly enough, upon his head.

He lived for some months during 1893 in the Franciscan Monastery at Pantasaph, in North Wales, and stayed later, for a short time, in the Monastery at Crawley. In a letter written to an old schoolfellow from Pantasaph, in the summer of 1893, he mentions that he had been so badly bitten in the arm as not to be able to use his pen properly.

About 1898 he became attached to the staff of the *Academy*, and to that journal, and to the *Athenæum*, contributed many noteworthy articles and reviews. One of his colleagues on the *Academy* states that it was quite a usual thing when reading over the proof of an article by Thompson "to exclaim aloud on his splendid handling of a subject demanding the best literary knowledge and insight." Another has shown how Thompson exercised the privilege, peculiar to the poet, of disregarding the ordinary rules of method and order pertaining to a business office. He was (we are told) the most unbusinesslike creature, and often drove the editor to despair. His copy (always written on pages torn from penny exercise books) came pretty regularly, but it was almost impossible to get him to return proofs. Neither imploring letters nor peremptory telegrams availed. Then he would walk in, calmly produce from his basket or wonderful pockets a mass of galleys, and amongst them as likely as not, two or three telegrams unopened. But (to quote Mr. Meynell once more) "editors forebore to be angry at his delays, for after a while of waiting, they got from him, at last, what none else could give at all."

"colour, that arrested his attention. As for his garb, "Barath cared little. . . . But the lustre of those eyes, "intensified by the contrast of the sunken cheeks and "emaciated face he had never seen in England before." Barath is going to visit a friend, Colonel Wingate. Arrived at the house, he noticed that the Colonel was wrapt in thought, ever and anon casting an anxious glance down the gravel path which ran past the house in a line with the main road beyond.

"Yes, we are expecting a friend," Wingate explains. "Rather, one, the privilege of whose friendship we hope to "deserve some day. . . . I am here to-day and gone "to-morrow, but this man's work will last as long as the "English language lasts—which itself will survive the "wreck of the British Empire."

Needless to say the expected guest is Francis Thompson, described later in the book as "this man whose intellect was perhaps the greatest among Englishmen of his day." A delightful glimpse is given of Thompson as a smoker. He takes out his pipe, strikes a match, gives a puff, holds the match over the bowl till his fingers are nearly burnt, then throws away the match, and strikes another—and so on. Wingate afterwards picks up the matches and counts them. "Just fourteen!" he says gleefully. But then he wraps them up in a piece of tissue paper and puts them carefully away in his vest pocket!

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FRANCIS THOMPSON AT THE AGE OF FIFTEEN.

For some years before his death, Thompson was a familiar object in London streets. He would wander about alone, apparently in an aimless fashion, but in reality absorbed in his own lavendered thoughts—that state of alienation from passing things so necessary for artistic contemplation. Often enough he might have been seen clad—winter and summer alike—in a brown cloak, or ulster, and with a basket, like a fish basket, slung around his shoulders. This he used to carry the books he had to review. Though of a painfully shy and retiring disposition, he was a cheerful companion, with the saving grace of humour. One who knew him well as boy and man states that “in him there sat enthroned not only the stern and haughty muse of Tragedy, but her gentler sister, Comedy.” He was, too, as numerous passages in his works denote, a keen student of science. One failing—if failing it be—he certainly had: he detested letter writing. The picture would hardly be complete without adding that, according to some, (Mr. Coventry Patmore among them,) Thompson was one of the best talkers in the city. He spoke from his own convictions with extreme fluency, yet weighing his words in matters of a controversial nature, and careful always to avoid offence. Indeed, he would not knowingly have hurt a talkative fly! The hierarchic order of the universe, the culture and ethics of the Greeks, the philosophy of the schoolmen, the tactics of military commanders in bygone centuries, the latest advance in science—alike gave opportunity for the silver and gold surprises of his speech to the few (the very few) with whom he was familiar. Of

his favourite lines in Shakespeare and Milton, or the merits and virtues and the hundred niceties of style of his cricket heroes of the past, he would enlarge for hours.

Emaciated and worn by disease, he could still exhibit an extraordinary glow and vivacity of manner. He dealt largely in the names and rites of old: the pomp of old time facts formed the pomp of his present dreams.

The same mental abstraction which caused him to be nearly run over at Manchester in his student days, which lost him on the South Downs, which resulted in the burning of the bed on which he had fallen asleep while smoking in his apartments—and which is evidently hinted at in the incident of his alighting at the wrong station on the visit to Boscombe in the “Prince of Destiny,” followed him in all his moves.

He seldom spoke of his nightmare days; when he did, it was not complainingly. He could not have written with Tennyson—

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff; and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope.

Aloof from men he dwelt with God, recognising to the full—

All which I took from thee I did but take
Not for thy harms
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.

To his eyes the material universe was literally full of the
 "many coloured wisdom of God," and Christ he saw

Lo here! lo there!—ah me, lo everywhere!

Who can doubt the evident sincerity of the lines in
 "Any Saint?" :

But He a little hath
 Declined His stately path
 And my
 Feet set more high.

† † † †

And bolder now and bolder
 I lean upon that shoulder,
 So near
 He is, and dear.

Though Thompson's lot in life was so opposite to that of
 the happy soul in Crashaw's "Temperance"

The happy soul, that all the way
 To Heaven, hath a summer's day—

he was not soured by his dreadful experiences, but with
 heart warmed by the Divine presence, accepted them in a
 patient, matter-of-fact way, conscious that he had kept "the
 white bird in his breast" protected. To other writers he
 was invariably generous. One who had been associated
 with him in literary work testifies: "A more careful or
 more generous reviewer never lived; to contemporary
 poets, indeed, he was over tender, and *I never heard him speak
 an ungenerous word of any living soul.*"

Devoted to his faith, enthusiastic when writing of her

About whose moonèd brows
 Seven stars make seven glows
 Seven stars for seven woes—

in word and work alike severely chaste—he has already been called “Our Lady’s Poet.” A more loyal courtier of the Queen of Heaven it would certainly be difficult to find !

A contributor to the *Church Times* (March, 1911) writes that in later life Thompson always exculpated his father from any share in the break with the family which marked the poet’s early years in London ; and clung to the recollection that they met again, when the father had been “entirely kind.”

The poet’s fondness for children was of the most natural kind. He did not condescend to them ; he was one of themselves. Elaborate dissection of the child-mind did not commend itself to Thompson. “He was content (as a writer in the *Christian World Pulpit* puts it) to play with children without analysing them, and to pass with them through their own secret doorways into the wonder-world to which they belong.” In answer to the question which he himself asks “Know you what it is to be a child ?” he gives the answer : “It is to have a spirit still streaming “from the waters of baptism. It is to believe in love, to “believe in loveliness, to believe in belief. It is to be so “little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ears ; it “is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, “lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything.”

The poet’s unaffected child-love is revealed in many a passage in his works, but nowhere more notably perhaps than in the beautiful passage in “The Hound of Heaven” where the soul approaches nearest to the object of its

quest. For it is not in the wind-walled Palace of Nature, nor yet in the wilful face of skies, but it *is* within the little children's eyes that he makes the easing of the human smart come nearest to realisation! And in another poem "To my Godchild," in lines of tender felicity, he makes it clear it is in the "Nurseries of Heaven" that he would be placed :—

Then, as you search with unaccustomed glance
 The ranks of Paradise for my countenance,
 Turn not your tread along the Uranian sod
 Among the bearded counsellors of God ;
 For, if in Eden as on earth are we,
 I sure shall keep a younger company :
 Pass where beneath their rangèd gonfalons
 The starry cohorts shake their shielded suns,
 The dreadful mass of their enridgèd spears ;
 Pass where majestic the eternal peers,
 The stately choice of the great saintdom, meet—
 A silvern segregation, globed complete
 In sandalled shadow of the Triune feet ;

† † † †

Pass the crystalline sea, the lampads seven :—
 Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven.

† † † †

Thompson died of consumption. At the beginning of November, 1907, he entered, on the advice of his friends, the Hospital of St. Elizabeth and St. John, in St. John's Wood, London. There he died on the 13th of the same month, in his forty-eighth year. He had prepared himself devoutly for the end ; received the Sacraments ; and was ready when the summons, long expected, came.

At the time of entering the hospital he was so terribly emaciated that he weighed but five stone. The devoted

Sister (Mother Michael) who tended him states that he was very quiet and wonderfully unselfish in the ward, where he was visited from time to time by members of the Meynell family. It is a curious circumstance, worthy of passing mention, that among the books which he kept within reach as he lay dying was Mr. Jacobs' "Many Cargoes." He was interred on the 16th November, in St. Mary's Cemetery, Kensal Green. His grave now bears a stone on which, in beautiful lettering (the work of the sculptor Eric Gill) are the words:—

FRANCIS THOMPSON,

1859—1907.

"LOOK FOR ME IN THE NURSERIES OF HEAVEN."

Surely no more suitable line could have been chosen from his works for one who, with all his intellect, was still a child at heart!

The sorrows of his earlier days had endeared him to his friends, and if the "uses of his adversity" had any sweets at all, among them must surely be reckoned the added endearment of those he cherished. In his coffin were roses from the garden of Mr. George Meredith, inscribed with Mr. Meredith's testimony "A true poet, one of a small band"; and violets from kindred turf were sent by Mrs. Meynell, whose praises he had with such soul-worship sung. Mr. Meynell's biographical note prefaced to the volume of "Selected Poems" ends: "Devoted friends lament him, no less for himself than for his singing. He

had made all men his debtors, leaving to those who loved him the memory of a unique personality, and to English poetry an imperishable name."

His rich and varied colourings with their old-time touches of re-captured glory, his rapt mysticism and high thinking, the wide range of his mental vision, and the answering splendours of his lofty imaginings, have placed him high in the permanent ranks of fame. Indeed, it is true to say of Thompson—as of Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson—that so long as poems are read, so long will some of them, at least, be his—the great, though hitherto but little known Victorian, who shall yet be counted memorable by all jealous of the high traditions of English Song.





Thompson and the Verdict of Time.



SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THOMPSON'S VERSE.

Thompson and the Verdict of Time.

In literature, as in science and art, the great works of the high thinkers have not always obtained immediate appreciation. Indeed, many of the writers whom the verdict of time has placed among the immortals, have, according to their biographers, been slow of recognition. Coleridge, and to a greater extent, Wordsworth, may be cited offhand as examples of poets whose works remained enshrined for many years in the breasts of comparatively few readers.

It need occasion no surprise, therefore, that Francis Thompson's poetry, although hailed with delight by the critics, is not yet as widely known among the general public as its merits deserve; nor need it be thought that his verse will pass into oblivion because, in the short space since the poet's death, it has not become the subject of more extensive notice. Great poetry advances but slowly in general estimation. Its appeal is always in the first instance to the more discerning thinkers, and *then* to the larger body who are content to, or must of necessity, follow their lead. Of poetry meant—like Thompson's—to elevate the mind rather than tickle the vanity or follow the fashions of the age, it

is especially true that its due recognition must be the result of that maturer judgment which time alone can give. Doubtless, also, the deep symbolism pervading many of Thompson's poems must be taken into account in any consideration of the ultimate estimate of his work; but it should be remembered that symbolism, when combined with clarity of vision and depth of poetical insight, is but the stronghold for a precious message which might, without such protection, be lost.

It has been well said that in all real poetry—poetry that is to endure—there must be certain essentials: melody of rhythm; fertility of ideas; beauty of sentiment; skilful dignification and blending of words; the faculty of seeing what is dark to others. To say that Thompson had a wonderful and fascinating melody of rhythm; a profusion of the loveliest ideas; a deep, reverent, and ever-present sentiment and sense of the beauty on every side, and a profound mastery over many kinds of versification which he wedded to an extraordinary range of subjects,—is not to exceed, but to fall below, the pronouncements of many of the greatest authorities. But over and above the richness of essentials, he had a vision so celestial, combined with an imagery so rich and beautiful, that he stands unsurpassed in these qualities by any poet of his age. Transcendent thought, glowing pictures, striking flashes of imagination, spell-binding touches of loveliness, passages of intertwined intellectualism,—abound in Thompson's verse. His is no more the poetry for an idle man as a substitute for a cigar, than is Browning's. He

takes an idea and develops it, adding layer after layer of thought with the daring of the true poet, and the enthusiasm of the mystic saturated with consciousness of the supernatural. Ranging heaven and earth in his quest for comparisons to illustrate the fancies of his mind, he "oozes poetry at every pore." In the wealth of his wonderful words, he makes from the old hard-worked English language the materials for almost a new dictionary. The marvel is that, being so heavily weighted with word and thought, he should proceed smoothly; yet proceed smoothly he does—a very wizard of musical speech. The great things and the small alike serve his purpose. He is as "gold-dusty with tumbling amidst the stars" as Shelley (to whom he applies the description), yet a piece of burnt wood supplies the clue which he fashions into the subtle thought—

Designer Infinite!—
Ah! must Thou char the wood ere
Thou canst limn with it?—

and a simple flower the lines—

God took a fit of Paradise-wind,
A slip of ærle weather,
A thought as simple as Himself,
And ravelled them together.

Although such passages as—

Thou hast devoured mammoth and mastodon,
And many a floating bank of fangs,
The scaly scourges of thy primal brine,
And the tower-crested plesiosaure.
Thou fillest thy mouth with nations, gorgest slow
On purple æons of kings; man's hulking towers
Are carcase for thee, and to modern sun
Disglutt'st their splintered bones—

(taken from his poem addressed to Earth) are to be found, it was nevertheless the same hand which wrote the exquisitely quaint and simple lines :

Little Jesus, wast Thou shy
Once, and just so small as I ?
And what did it feel like to be
Out of Heaven, and just like me ?
I should think that I would cry
For my house all made of sky ;
I would look about the air,
And wonder where my angels were ;
And at waking 'twould distress me—
Not an angel there to dress me !

Like Blake, it was his—

To see a world in a grain of sand,
A heaven in a wild flower—

Unlike Blake, his mysticism is never shrouded in mist, nor are his visions of awful holiness ever curtained in “concealing vapours.”

If no songster has beaten so painfully against the bars of the flesh, surely none has sung, as Thompson, at times, with such an utter ecstasy of delight. If many of his poems are charged with a self-conscious sadness and pessimism and bitter self analysis, there is still enough of joyous offering left to catch his readers “fast for ever in a tangle of sweet rhymes.” To read his verse is to walk for ever after in a more beautiful, though, perchance, a more mystical world of life and thought, and of correlated greatness, with a tread which—

Stirring the blossoms in the meadow grass
Flickers the unwithering stars.

The world and human life were, to Thompson, "crammed with Heaven and aflame with God." Thus, while Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning speak of their spiritual experiences in a more or less uncertain way, the spiritual experiences of Thompson are as real as the physical—the practice of ascetism deliberately accepted and propounded. In "The Mistress of Vision" he puts forth his "stark gospel of renunciation," and asks:—

Where is the land of Luthany,
Where is the tract of Elenore?
I am bound therefor.

The answer is the heroic one of abnegation and self-denial contained in the lines which follow the passage quoted, abnegation and self-denial which he himself ardently practised in his maturer years—practised as well as preached. Doubtless this poem—"The Mistress of Vision" will rank eventually next to "The Hound of Heaven" for spiritual potentiality combined with genius of inspiration.

An interesting collection of great poetic lines has recently been made by a famous American (Mr. Hudson Maxim), and is given at the end of his monumental work on "The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language." The author claims for his list that it probably embraces by far the larger part of the greatest poetic lines in the English language. Of the hundred and ninety-two examples selected, all chosen for their

rich poetic thought, two are from Longfellow, two from Tennyson, three from Wordsworth, and four each from Shelley and Thompson.

Thompson's poetry is, as one writer puts it "all compact of thought"—thought elaborated with exquisite subtlety, and an endless profusion and variety of metaphor and simile, drawn from a thousand sources, but most happily, from his profound knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, and the Church's philosophy, dogma, and liturgy. Indeed, to go back to the poet of "white fire," to whom Thompson has been most frequently, and most aptly perhaps, compared: is not Crashaw himself often outstripped, even in his own special glory of "mixing heaven and earth," by our own poet?

Mr. J. L. Garvin on reading Thompson's first volume wrote, that in the rich and virile harmonies of his line—in strange and lovely vision—in fundamental meaning—Thompson is possibly the first of Victorian poets, and at least of none the inferior,—a view which time has strengthened and the poet's later works confirmed. Whether the recent assertions of Mr. C. K. Chesterton and others, that all serious critics now class Thompson with Shelley and Keats, be true or not, there can be no question but that critics, whether serious or otherwise, are agreed in placing him among the imperishable names of English Song. Certainly no list of the six greatest poets of the nineteenth century would be conclusive without the name of Francis Thompson!



FRANCIS THOMPSON IN 1893.

From the simple and lovely lines "To a Snowflake," "Daisy," "The Poppy," "The Making of Viola" (in which he describes the making of a child in Heaven), and the rest of his childhood verses, to the regal "Ode to the Setting Sun" and the airy elegance of "Dream Tryst," and on again to "The Anthem of Earth" and "The Orient Ode," Thompson passes from the simplest to the grandest elements of being, and shows himself a—

Great pre-appointed Prodigal of Song
This mad world soothing as he sweeps along.

Even Tennyson with his great quality of making language musical, is surpassed by the younger poet. If anyone should doubt this, let him study the poems mentioned, and end with "To my Godchild" and "The Cloud's Swan Song." Verses such as these, and the inspired "Mistress of Vision" (of which Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch declared that so such poem had been written since Coleridge attempted, and left off writing, "Kubla Khan"), will continue to soar among the peaks of literature and adorn—

The gold gateway of the stars,
as "The Hound of Heaven" will continue to be cherished—though its full grandeur may be grasped only by the deeper-souled few—to the end of time.

A glance through any of the volumes of Thompson's poems will at once show that many of his lines need careful study, besides the assistance of a dictionary and books of reference on many subjects—ancient and modern.

But this may be said with certainty: if the precise hues of the poet's meaning cannot always be seen at once, the central idea is clear enough, and glory of colour *is present*, though its splendours may be too great for immediate comprehension. Writing on this aspect of the poet's works, a writer in the *Irish Rosary* for September, 1912, says: "There is no mist or haze attached to his imagery. They will catch away the mind's breath at the first flash, but when they have been read carefully, they will soon become clear-seen and clear-cut, even brilliant in their obscurity, obvious perhaps by their very unexpectedness. His most intricate harmonies are loaded with a rush of music that may perplex, but which works itself out in the end, perhaps upon the quaver of the last syllable: the feeling remains with the reader all the time that nobody else could quite have written it, and that Thompson himself could not have written anything else, that his words and expressions have waited a thousand years for his coming to claim and set them to the highest use. He did not open his images like sky-lights to make clear a chance meaning here and there in his work, but he opened, as it were, a whole apse of windows to illuminate one central idea throned altarwise. Each of his great poems is builded delicately, like a great window of stained glass, and every fragment of it is filled with the rich colour inherent to his words. At the first rush of thought the eyes are dazzled as by a sudden blaze from above, yet at a little distance every word falls harmonized and ordered into a net-work of metre, which grapples colour to colour and syllable to

syllable as simply and convincingly as the beaded lead that controls the splendoured glories of some rose-window."

That Thompson knew something at least of the greatness of his work may be gathered from the lines:—

The sleep-flower sways in the wheat its head,
Heavy with dreams, as that with bread ;
The goodly grain and the sun-flushed sleeper
The reaper reaps, and Time the reaper.

I hang 'mid men my needless head,
And my fruit is dreams, as theirs is bread ;
The goodly men and the sun-hazed sleeper
Time shall reap, but after the reaper
The world shall glean of me—me the sleeper!
(POEMS.)

With—

The loud
Shouts of the crowd

he was not concerned. Rather would it have pleased him to know that his voice would become audible when the "high noises" of the crowd had passed. In his review of the poetry of Mrs. Meynell, there occurs a passage which illustrates this, and might, in very truth, be applied to much of his own muse:—

"The footfalls of her muse waken not sounds, but silences. We lift a feather from the marsh and say: 'This way went a heron.' . . . It is poetry, *the spiritual voice of which will become audible when the 'high noises' of to-day have followed the feet that made them.*"

What other, of all the poetry of the nineteenth century, has awakened such silences of thought and such soulful meditation as "The Hound of Heaven" and "The Mistress of Vision"?

To come at length to another characteristic of Thompson's verse—reference must certainly be made to his frequent neologisms. To those who complain of the poet's own coinage, it need only be said that the splendid use he makes of words non-existent in pre-Thompsonian English is, after all, the poet's chief justification. To quote again from the *Irish Rosary*: "Delight, not indignation, is the proper attitude of people who are made suddenly aware that fine gold has just been brought to light in their rock-garden."

That the poet who, in his own words—
 Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies,
 should abound in "Nature touches" is what might be expected. "*Mist* of tears," "*vistaed* hopes," "*Titanic* glooms," "*chasmèd* fears," "*skyey* blossoms," "sighful *branches*," "*vapourous* shroudage," "*dawning* answers," "*cowled* night," "strings of *sand*," "*windy* trammel," "parable in the *pathless cloud*"—and a hundred other examples might be given of the descriptions drawn from natural phenomena, in Thompson's poetry.

Another feature still of Thompson's verse is its astonishing variety:

The freshness of May, and the sweetness of June,
 And the fire of July in its passionate noon—

each finds a place in the gorgeous "pomp and prodigality" of his muse. Lines on Children, on Cricket, on the English Martyrs—verses of "utter chastity" on the benefactress whom he calls his "dear administress" (the inspirer of the group of poems "Love in Dian's lap")—chants of the Autumn and Nature—odes to the rising and sinking Sun—poetic representation of scientific truth—poems of sadness and poems of ecstasy—detached fragments of thought and philosophy—flights into the realms of mysticism, mythology, theology—images drawn from the Scriptures and the liturgy of the Church,—all are there, with many a word of "learned length and thundering sound" adorning, without loading, the sense he wishes to convey. Lovers of Shakespeare will come across many a passage of Shakesperean touch; admirers of Shelley, many a passage of Shelleyan flavour.

In such a treasury it is difficult to pick and choose for samples of the poet's art, but the following passages, the first and second descriptive of flowers; the third, one of the extracts from "The Hound of Heaven" given by Mr. Hudson Maxim in his collection of great poetic lines; and the last, a passage illustrative of the more intricate structure of Thompson's verse, may be taken as typical, to some degree, of the poet's style:—

- (1.) Summer set lip to earth's bosom bare,
 And left the flushed print in a poppy there:
 Like a yawn of fire from the grass it came,
 And the fanning wind puffed it to flapping flame.

(*Selected Poems*, "THE POPPY.")

- (II.) Who made the splendid rose
 Saturate with purple glows:
 Cupped to the marge with beauty; a perfume-press
 Whence the wind vintages
 Gushes of warmed fragrance richer far
 Than all the flavourous ooze of Cyprus' vats?
 Lo, in yon gale which waves her green cymar,
 With dusky cheeks burnt red
 She sways her heavy head,
 Drunk with the must of her own odourousness;
 While in a moted trouble the vexed gnats
 Maze, and vibrate, and tease the noontide hush.
 Who girt dissolved lightnings in the grape?
 Summered the opal with an Irised flush?
 (*Selected Poems*, "ODE TO THE SETTING SUN.")
- (III.) I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
 ("THE HOUND OF HEAVEN.")
- (IV.) Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
 Day, a dedicated priest
 In all his robes pontifical exprest,
 Lifteth slowly, lifteth sweetly,
 From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,
 Yon orbèd sacrament confest
 Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;
 And when the grave procession's ceased,
 The earth with due illustrious rite
 Blessed,—ere the frail fingers featly
 Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
 His sacerdotal stoles unvest—
 Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,
 The sun in august exposition meetly
 Within the flaming monstrance of the West.
 (*Selected Poems*, "ORIENT ODE.")

Of Shelley and Keats—if reference must be made—it will suffice to say that, singularly tuneful and marvels of pure melody as their own verses are, it is a relief at

times to pass from their earthy sweetness to the loftier heights and sublimer beauties of Francis Thompson—the poet “God-smitten.” Contrast the lines from Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (the poem which most of all contains his own special “Gospel”) :

Thy light alone—like mist o’er mountains driven,
 Or music by the night wind sent,
 Thro’ strings of some still instrument,
 Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
 Gives grace and truth to life’s unquiet dream.

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart
 And come, for some uncertain moments lent.
 Man were immortal, and omnipotent,
 Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
 Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.

† † † † †

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
 To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?

† † † † †

The day becomes more solemn and serene
 When noon is past—there is a harmony
 In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,
 Which thro’ the summer is not heard or seen,
 As if it could not be, as if it had not been !
 Thus let thy power, which like the truth
 Of nature on my passive youth
 Descended, to my onward life supply
 Its calm—to one who worships thee,
 And every form containing thee,
 Whom, Spirit fair, thy spells did bind
 To fear himself, and love all human kind.

Or the lines from Keats—

So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
 Upon the midnight hours;
 Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
 From swingèd censer teeming :
 Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
 Of pale-mouthed prophet dreaming.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with
pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind—

and the rest of Keats's "Ode to Psyche" (an ode in which he took special pains to express his distinctive thought), with the exalted harmony of Thompson's "Hound of Heaven," or the latter's poem "To Any Saint," the most marvellous compendium of Christian mysticism and the Sermon on the Mount, that has ever been penned in poetic lines.

If the message of Shelley was—as it seems to have been—that love and beauty shall endure to unite all things; and the message of Keats, to restore the spirit of the Greeks and "Art for Art's sake," that of Francis Thompson is the more exalted. For in what does it differ, save in the manner of delivery, from that cry of the great Augustine, which has rung down the ages in ever-increasing volume?:—

"Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are
restless until they find their rest in Thee."

This sentence of the Aristotle of Christianity echoes through the poetry of Francis Thompson—and if literary fame, to be immortal, must be linked with an undying message, then, surely, to the poet of "terrible depths and *triumphant heights*" is Immortality assured.



"The Hound of Heaven."



“The Hound of Heaven.”

“Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.”
(*The Hound of Heaven.*)

Francis Thompson leapt into fame among those able to discern true poetic genius by the chance discovery of the verse-set gems contained in a short poem which he composed when on the verge of destitution and despair. Since the day when this singer of golden song wrote on a soiled scrap of paper, picked up by him in a London street, the lines which brought about his recognition, his works have been read and re-read with increasing appreciation, while the greatest critics have vied with one another in proclaiming his praise. But if there is one work more than the rest of the vagrant Prodigal of Song (albeit not the one first alluded to) which has fired the heart and glistened the eye, it is his religious ode entitled “The Hound of Heaven.” This wonderful lyric, which is considered by most of the authorities to be Thompson’s poetic masterpiece, came as an inspiration amid the doubt, and darkness, and the imperfect faith of other Victorian poets. Throughout its lines God is no vague abstraction, but a Presence most intimate—loving, and eagerly pursuing the soul that would find satisfaction elsewhere than in Him. It is, of all poems perhaps, the poem of Divine insistency.

Whether the original idea, which developed in course of time into "The Hound of Heaven," was first planted in the author's mind by the thought of the *pursuing love* in Silvio Pellico's "Dio Amore," or, as seems more likely, was suggested by one of the poems of the Spanish mystic known as St. John of the Cross (of whom Thompson was a close student and admirer), or whether it arose solely out of the circumstances of the poet's own life and the innate sense, which runs through so many of his verses, of the nearness of Heaven and the proximity of God, is a matter of surmise. Certain it is that no mystical words of such profound power and such soul-stirring sweetness have been written in modern times.

Though it may be said that in a certain sense Thompson viewed the world as but the dustbin for the Creator's handiwork, he was yet supremely conscious of the beauty displayed on every side, even in the body of the lowly worm. The exquisite glimpses of the things of Nature, those shapers of his own moods, which he incidentally presents in the course of the poem as the tremendous Lover (God, symbolised as the Hound), pursues His tireless quest—strike at once the imagination, as surely as the impressive symbolism employed, penetrates and illumines the soul.

Here and there one is reminded, by the spirituality of thought and phrase, of a similar vein in Crashaw—or by the fine frenzy of a line, to something akin in Blake or Rossetti. To the present writer the lines—

I tempted all His servitors, but to find
 My own betrayal in their constancy,
 In faith to Him their fickleness to me,
 Their traitorous trueness, and their loyal deceit—

invariably recall the well-known oxymoron in Tennyson's
 " Elaine " :—

His honour rooted in dishonour stood
 And faith, unfaithful, kept him falsely true.

The idea of the "arches of the years" in the opening
 section—

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down *the arches of the years* ;—

would undoubtedly be suggested by the bridge of life in the lovely "Vision of Mirzah" contributed by Addison to the *Spectator* under date September 1, 1711. This bridge (seen by Mirzah after he had listened to the tunes of the shepherd-clad genius which reminded him of those heavenly airs played to the departed souls of good men, upon their first arrival in Paradise, to wear out the impressions of their last agonies), consisted of "*three score and ten entire arches*, with several broken arches, which added to those that were entire, made up the number about an hundred." Such a piece of superfine prose would be certain to make a deep impression on Thompson's susceptible mind.

In poetry it is more or less essential that besides the outer gems that flash on all alike, there should be some that lie below the surface, and need some mental digging to unearth. In "The Hound of Heaven" these hidden

gems abound, but they can hardly be said to be too deeply buried for the earnest seeker, when once the prevailing idea and the nobility of the poet's thought, are grasped. The symbolism employed, though often most daring, is free from the disfiguring 'eccentricity' of many mystical poets: the thought and diction befit the exalted subject of the verse, and transcend all conventions.

The poem proceeds by way of striking similes, which hold the reader spellbound in an atmosphere of spiritual elevation: fresh and more towering peaks of mental conception come into view as the grandeur of the theme develops; the end is in the Valley of Calm, where the surrender of the tired soul follows as a natural climax, in lines of the most exquisite simplicity.

The chief interest lies, perhaps, in the genuine humanity which pervades the poem throughout, and in the wonderful mental pictures often conjured up, sometimes by a single line. In the few words—

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears;

as again in the lines—

I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist;

and—

Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlements of eternity;—

a host of conceptions may arise in the mind, without exhausting the full meaning of the poet's words. Great alike in theme and execution, and in the completeness of its

message, it is safe to say that as a religious poem, "The Hound of Heaven" has no superior. It stands unique, for all the world and for all time!

Amid all the artistic trope and perfect poetic imagery, certain passages will doubtless appear more noteworthy to some than to others, but it will surely be of special interest to most to note that it is in the little children's eyes that the soul approaches nearest the object of its quest, ere it sinks beneath the Hand outstretched caressingly.

It is a curious fact, not devoid of significance, that the poem was constructed at the time that Thompson was composing melodies of a very different order—the pieces varied, sweet, and gay, which make up his volume of "Sister Songs," published in 1895. As "The Hound of Heaven" appeared in Thompson's first volume of poems, issued in 1893, it would seem that the actual year when the "poem for all time" was written, may have been either 1892 or 1893.

Strange and startling fancies in words; adjectives that illumine like "furnaces in the night"; deep sounds and echoes—the sounds of restless humanity in search of the world's witchery, the echoes of the message of the Psalmist of old,—and underlying all, the pleading of the Father for His prodigal son:—such, in short, is "The Hound of Heaven."



"Ode to the Setting Sun."



"Ode to the Setting Sun."

Whatever may have been the general method of Francis Thompson in settling the final wording of his poems, he seems to have been at special pains in giving its ultimate form to his "Ode to the Setting Sun." Words, lines, and whole passages have been re-shaped to 'list of his mind' since the first appearance of the poem in "Merry England." A noticeable change lies in the substitution of simpler language, an example of which may be seen in the passage altered from—

Thou sway'st thy sceptred beam
O'er all earth's broad loins teem,
She sweats thee through her pores of verdurous
 spilth;
Thou art light in her light,
Thou art might in her might,
Fruitfulness in her fruit, and foison in her tilth—

in the Ode as it originally appeared, to

Thou sway'st thy sceptred beam
O'er all delight and dream,
Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance;
And like a jocund maid
In garland-flowers arrayed,
Before thy ark earth keeps her sacred dance—

as the lines occur later in the volume of "New Poems."

As the Ode now stands, free from some of the more startling archaisms and coinage of words, it must ever rank as a great spell-binding poem, a pageant of scintillating colour and sound. The marvels and undreamt of treasures of the wonder-working Sun are drawn out at length, and heaped up, through many a poetic line, for the beholder's gaze. The regal splendours befitting the subject, the ornateness and dignity of the poet's thought, the symbolic references and sacramental vision—conduct the reader along the passage between matter and soul, and show him some of the many-splendoured things conceivable only by the mind of the Seer. The majestic strains of Handel's "Largo"; the soul-filling sweetness of Gounod's "Messe Solonnelle"; the lights and raptures of a De Beriot's "Ninth Concerto"—surge into the ears as the recital continues. Amid such delights as these is the reader carried to, and within, the realms of beauty.

The Ode is divided into three parts. In the Prelude, the setting Sun—"a bubble of fire"—drops slowly, as the poignant music of the violin and harp are borne into the soul. In the Ode proper, the note of sadness—the sun-set mood—is continued; the mystical twins of Time—Death and Birth—come into the poet's mind, "and of these two the fairer thing is Death." As in some great musical masterpiece, the opening bars—low, sad, and weird—prepare the way for the cymbals' clang and the full orchestral effects, so here: nor is it long before the "music blasts make deaf the sky." In bewilderingly beautiful language the poet proceeds to depict the splen-

dours of the sun's triumphal dying, and to consider the sway of its sceptred beam from the time of its birth—the time when it burst from the great void's husk and leaped “on the throat o' the dusk.” The deluge, “when the ancient heavens did in rains depart”; the lion, the tiger, and the stealthy stepping pard; the entombèd trees (now the light-bearers of the earth); the rose “cupped to the marge with beauty,” the “draped” tulip, the “snowed” lily, the earth itself suckled at the breast of the sun, and “scarfed” with the morning light,—these and many a gorgeous miracle of the sun's working, are examined in turn, and over each the sway of the “sceptred beam” is shown. The wind and the wailing voices that should meet from hill, stream, and grove to chant a dirge at the red glare of the Sun's fall—the Naiads, Dryads, and Nereids, and the other nymphs of old, are all conjured up in their own wonted haunts. And then the scene changes:

A space, and they fleet from me. Must ye fade—
O old, essential candours, ye who made
The earth a living and a radiant thing—
And leave her corpse in our strained, cheated arms?

The poet sees in their departure a resemblance to his own “vanishing—nay, vanished day,” and his dark mood is only changed by the deferred thought of Eternity, whereat “a rifting light burns through the leaden broodings” of his mind.

O blessèd Sun, thy state
Uprisen or derogate
Dafts me no more with doubt; I seek and find.

In the opening lines of another of his poems, the "Orient Ode," the poet sees in the Sunrise a symbol of the Benediction Service of the Catholic Church. Now, in the Setting Sun, he sees a radiant image of the King-maker of Creation, a type indeed of Calvary:

Thou art of Him a type memorial,
Like Him thou hang'st in dreadful pomp of blood
Upon thy western rood.

The vein of triumph thenceforth predominates; for it is the falling acorn buds the tree, and as—

There is nothing lives but something dies—

so, too—

There is nothing dies but something lives—

and though birth and death are inseparable on earth

They are twain yet one, and Death is Birth.

In the after-strain (the concluding part of the Ode) the note of triumph rings again: a message from the gentle Queen of Heaven leaves the poet "light of cheer," and he gives thanks for his griefs:

The restless windward stirrings of whose feather
Prove them the brood of immortality.

The "Ode to the Setting Sun" (written at Storrington in 1889) possesses a unique interest, inasmuch as it was the first poem of length that Thompson wrote after his rescue from the life of poverty in London, and afforded the first all-convincing revelation of the poet's genius.

One of the many functions of poetry is to penetrate beyond the reach of science, and reveal, in reverential way, certain hidden truths of nature which, without the imagination of the poet to cross the abysses of dividing space, might remain but irritating and unpictured mysteries. Canon Sheehan expresses this in *The Intellectuals*: "She (Nature) retreats, as we advance, and gathers up her skirts, lest the very swish of them should reveal her hiding places. There is one, and one only, to whom she reveals herself, and lifts up her veil: and that is her poet."

Such a poet was Wordsworth; such a poet, in a large measure, was Emerson. Such a poet, too, letting in more than the rest, a flood of many-coloured light upon the created world (as in his "Ode to the Setting Sun"), was Francis Thompson!





Thompson's Last Poem.



Thompson's Last Poem.

When Francis Thompson died, early in the winter of 1907, he left among his papers a short unfinished poem bearing the double title:

In no Strange Land.
The Kingdom of God is within you.

which is noteworthy as the last and one of the most characteristic of his works. For in these triumphing stanzas there is held in retrospect—as Mr. Meynell puts it—the days and nights of human dereliction which the poet spent besides London's river, and in the shadow—but all radiance to him—of Charing Cross. Obviously differing from his polished masterpiece, “The Hound of Heaven,” the shorter poem bears yet a resemblance in that it treats of the world to be discerned by the eyesight that is spiritual, and exhibits a conception of equal daring. Thus the splendid audacity which, in the one, symbolises God as the pursuing Hound, depicts, in the other, Jacob's ladder pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross, and Christ walking on the water *of the Thames!*

Though Thompson has been styled the “mighty mystic,” he has many passages of sweet simplicity. His lines on a Snowflake and his verses entitled “Daisy” (verses

which may be compared to the "Lucy" or "We are Seven" of Wordsworth), are such as a child can understand; and in the last gift of his muse he has left an epitome of his life's verse, expressed in a clear and striking form, the beauty and significance of which few can miss.

It is when dealing with his favourite subject of the intimacy of God that the poet, whose heart was warmed by the Divine Presence as he sold matches in the street, displays his greatest charm. Here, compressed in the space of twenty-four lines, is to be found the very inmost of his thought, combined with a lustrous simplicity befitting the vehicle of his final message. Many who find themselves breathless in the elevation of "The Hound of Heaven" will, in the later lines, be able to follow the mind of the poet with ease, and grasp the import of his teaching to the full.

It has been said of another of our English poets (Chatterton) that he was "Poetry's Martyr." The description applies to Thompson also, but in a far nobler sense. The hopes of his youth blighted—crushed, as it seemed, on every side—it was the equally bitter lot of Francis Thompson to learn by experience that "turning love's bread is bought at hunger's price," and to find himself (in words of his own telling):—

Like one who sweats before a despot's gate,
Summoned by some presaging scroll of fate,
And knows not whether kiss or dagger wait;
And all so sickened is his countenance,
That courtiers buzz, "Lo, doomed!" and look at
him askance.

Yet, racked as he was, he stood true to his visions with enduring patience, and with a courage that has no counterpart on the field of battle. His was the martyrdom of living: to deliver his message, he prolonged his life, so full of physical pain, to the utmost. That he lived so long, was due to his unconquerable mind, his indomitable will to live—to live and sanctify the bodily suffering of his later years.

Through all the outer darkness of his unaccompanied days, the poet of the light within remained the same rapt celebrant of the soul, feasting his gaze on the world invisible, and proclaiming the high things that lie beyond the lowly. The very bitterness of his trials only strengthened his assurance in the reality of the hidden things of which he testifies. What wonder, then, that his last testimony should be of such special significance and potentiality?

The angels keep their ancient places ;—
Turn but a stone, and start a wing !
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

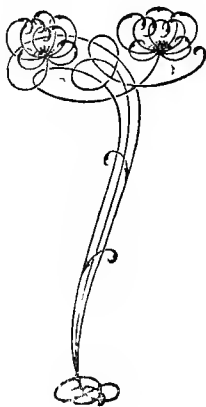
But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry ;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry ;—clinging Heaven by the hems ;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Genesareth, but Thames !

Surely, the angels must have clapped their hands with delight, as the poem proceeded.

What "The Hound of Heaven" is among the poet's longer pieces, his poem of the Vision of Thames—unpolished and unfinished though it be—is among the shorter. Both are adorned by tears and sunshine, and both are the channels of his profoundest message—

Heaven in Earth, and God in Man.



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